



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

### Fish and Wildlife Service

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#### AGENCIES BAND TOGETHER TO RESTORE DECLINING WOODCOCK

New conservation measures to restore the declining American woodcock populations were announced today by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Agriculture Department's Forest Service, and the Ruffed Grouse Society at the Eighth American Woodcock Symposium held at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

The conservation measures include signing of a new memorandum of understanding among the three groups to improve woodcock habitat and completion of a new American Woodcock Management Plan by the Fish and Wildlife Service to guide woodcock conservation nationwide.

"This memorandum of understanding is the first step in a major cooperative effort to increase woodcock numbers," said Richard N. Smith, deputy director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in a speech to the symposium October 30. "We know how to manage habitat to help woodcock--what we need now are partnerships, like this one with the Forest Service and the Ruffed Grouse Society, to put that knowledge to work in the woods where the birds are."

"With this symposium, we have the potential to begin a new era for the American woodcock," said Samuel Pursglove, executive director of the Ruffed Grouse Society. "If we make use of the momentum created here, our chances for helping the woodcock, as well as many other kinds of forest wildlife, will increase dramatically. In the last decade, the woodcock's problems have multiplied. If we don't build on what we learn at this symposium, the woodcock might not be able to wait another decade for the next symposium."

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Dave Unger, associate deputy chief of the Forest Service, said that the agency has a great deal of habitat for woodcock and is very pleased to be working with the Ruffed Grouse Society and the Fish and Wildlife Service to improve and restore it. "The 24 million acres on national forests in the East and South offer the largest acreage of habitats under one jurisdiction," Unger said. "This agreement provides an excellent opportunity on those lands for us to work with a lot of partners on behalf of the American woodcock."

Under the agreement, the Fish and Wildlife Service will advise the Forest Service on habitat management techniques to benefit woodcock. The Ruffed Grouse Society will assist with habitat improvement programs. All three groups will work to provide more information to private landowners on how to manage their woodlands for wildlife. Habitat management techniques for woodcock also benefit other species that prefer young forests, such as grouse, deer, turkey, snowshoe hare, and many songbirds.

The American Woodcock Management Plan completed by the Fish and Wildlife Service identifies needed woodcock research and describes ways in which Federal and state agencies, industry, conservation groups, and private landowners can work together to improve woodcock habitat.

American woodcock are renowned for their spectacular courtship flights and are popular with bird hunters who use pointing dogs. Woodcock are found in wooded regions of the East and Midwest. They breed mostly in northern states and Canada and migrate to southern states in the fall. A shorebird that has evolved to live in wooded habitats, the woodcock has mottled brown plumage, eyes set far back in the head, and a long flexible bill. Woodcock numbers have declined by 36 percent in the East and by 19 percent in the Midwest over the past 23 years, largely because of declining habitat quality due to the maturing of forests, many of which no longer provide the young growth favored by woodcock and some other wildlife species, and because of habitat loss from urban and agriculture development.

Copies of the American Woodcock Management Plan are available from the Woodcock Specialist, Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS 630 ARLSQ, Washington, DC 20240.

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Editors Note: Black-and-white photos of the American woodcock are available on free loan from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, audio-visual office, 202-208-5611.





FISH &amp; WILDLIFE

# Facts

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR • FISH &amp; WILDLIFE SERVICE

## DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BIRD WITH THE UPSIDE-DOWN BRAIN

The American woodcock's brain is upside-down, but that's not why it's in trouble.

Instead, the steady decline of this strange woodland bird is linked to the changing American lifestyle and landscape. Over the past quarter-century, suburbs, "farmettes," and mature woods have replaced the farm fields and young-growth forests that woodcock require. Woodcock numbers have declined by 36 percent in the East and by 19 percent in the Midwest over the past 23 years.

"What the woodcock needs is some help from people who own wooded property or fields," says Richard N. Smith, deputy director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "Most people don't realize they can improve their land's value for wildlife by managing part of their woods to let in new, young growth, or by planting trees in a field."

Found in wooded regions of the East and Midwest, the woodcock flourished in the first half of the century as people left their farms and abandoned fields grew up into young woods. Today, many of

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those woods and fields have been swallowed by development. Much of the remaining woodland has matured and no longer offers the patchwork of clearings, brush, and woods that woodcock need.

Most of the woodcock's habitat is privately owned and not managed for either wildlife or timber harvest. Success in controlling forest fires also has contributed to the woodcock's decline because fires are nature's way of creating openings for new growth in a mature forest.

The woodcock is truly a wonder of nature, a shorebird that has evolved to live in the woods. To adapt to its wooded habitat, the woodcock's eyes have migrated far back in its head, enabling it to see a full 360 degrees; in the process its brain flip-flopped to an upside-down position. The woodcock also evolved short, rounded wings so it can fly through dense cover. Its long, flexible bill enables it to probe for earthworms in the soft soil.

The woodcock's habit of remaining motionless, camouflaged by its mottled-brown plumage, makes it popular with hunters who use highly trained bird dogs. Woodcock also are a favorite of birdwatchers because of their spectacular courtship flights. At dusk or dawn (or all night when the moon is full), the male woodcock finds a clearing known as a "singing ground" and launches himself in spiraling flight, rising 200 to 300 feet before plummeting in a zigzag to the ground. He follows this ritual by wooing the female with a display on the ground, where she shyly remains while watching his performance.

Woodcock breed mostly in northern states and Canada, although some breed in more southerly woods. In fall, they migrate as individuals rather than flocks, waiting for the passage of weather fronts with favorable winds because they cannot fly well for long distances. Concentrations of migrating birds occur in the fall at Canaan Valley, West Virginia; Cape Charles, Virginia; and Cape May, New Jersey. Woodcock winter along the Atlantic coastal plain and in southern bottomland hardwood swamps, with the largest number wintering in Louisiana. In addition to the maturing of the woods where they breed, their migration and wintering habitats also are threatened by urban and recreational development and the conversion of bottomland hardwoods to agriculture.

To help the woodcock, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of Agriculture's U.S. Forest Service, the Ruffed Grouse Society, and other agencies are encouraging people who own woodlands to try some simple management techniques. Woodcock need several habitat types. They nest in shallow depressions on the ground, often at the base of a tree, and need young open

woodlands for nesting cover. They need dense thickets with moist soil for daytime feeding habitat, and clearings for their courtship flights.

At Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge in Maine, the Fish and Wildlife Service has experimented with management techniques and learned that woodcock numbers can be increased by clearcutting small strips through mature woods. Every few years, a new strip is cut next to the old strip. In this way, there is a continuous succession of young growth favored by woodcock. Such management techniques also benefit a number of other species.

Before beginning a management program, it is important to inventory the land and determine what kinds of habitat are available there and on adjacent parcels. It may be desirable to leave certain areas undisturbed, or to plan the management program to take advantage of the habitat characteristics of adjacent land parcels. County, state, and extension foresters can recommend ways to harvest timber and alert landowners to restrictions on harvesting in ecologically sensitive areas. Wildlife extension agents, who can be contacted through state extension universities, can also be of help.

Landowners interested in helping woodcock also can write for "A Landowner's Guide to Woodcock Management in the Northeast," available from the woodcock specialist, Office of Migratory Bird Management (address below); "Managing Forest and Wildlife Resources: an Integrated Approach (Central Hardwood Region)," available from the Purdue University Cooperative Extension Service, West Lafayette, IN 47907. They may also wish to contact the Ruffed Grouse Society, 1400 Lee Dr., Coraopolis, PA 15108. Copies of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's recently completed "American Woodcock Management Plan," which will guide nationwide conservation efforts, are available from the Office of Migratory Bird Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, MS 630 ARLSQ, Washington, DC 20240.